1 Passports and Ethnographic Entanglements

The passport photograph gives rise to a new kind of anxiety, a new neurosis for the citizen, that our face will be read against us, because the passport photo is always one that doesn’t look like us.

Mark Salter (2015, 22)

It is often the passport’s authenticity that is checked and compared to our body and not vice versa. . . . In moments of intended border crossing, the border guards were mostly concerned with the authenticity of the passport and not [with] its authentic relation to the represented body.

Mahmoud Keshavarz (2019, 37)

ARI’S PASSPORT

“My real name is not the one on my passport,” Ari said, when I first interviewed her in Hong Kong in 2011. The name on her Indonesian passport, she told me with a smile, was not her own asli name, but her older sister’s (asli means original, authentic, or real in Bahasa Indonesia, the national language). Her passport was that way because when Ari finished middle school and planned to leave her village in East Java to work abroad, she was only sixteen, below Indonesia’s required legal age of eighteen for Indonesian migrant workers at that time. Her older sister said that she would never go abroad, so, on the advice of the local sub-recruiter (PL, petugas lapangan), who was well regarded in the community and eager to
help, and with her family’s full knowledge and consent, she gave him her sister’s school certificate to begin the process, and the recruiter did the rest. He obtained the various necessary documents for her to acquire a passport, including the letter of permission from her father, an identity card (KTP), a copy of her family/household certificate (KK), and the exit letter required from the police. Then he obtained the passport on her behalf through a regional government office. Several months later, the broker brought her to the PJTKI or recruitment agency (called PPTKIS today), and they arranged for Ari’s departure from Indonesia and her travel to Hong Kong, where she would be a “foreign domestic helper” (FDH). At the departure counter at the airport, the recruitment agent distributed their passports to Ari and the other women. Subsequently, every three years, before her passport expired, the agency in Hong Kong renewed it for her at the Indonesian consulate.

Two years or so after her passport was first renewed, as Ari recounted with a laugh, her older sister decided to come to work in Hong Kong after all. She, too, procured a passport with the help of a PL, using her asli information, but she used a different recruitment agency. When Ari’s sister arrived at the airport in Hong Kong, she was taken aside by Hong Kong immigration officers, brought into a small interview room, and questioned at length. The officers repeatedly asked her name, date of birth, and place of residence. She answered honestly, insisting that her name, date of birth, place of residence, and so on had never changed. She did not mention her sister. They scrutinized her passport. Eventually they let her go, Ari said, “because it was obvious that she was telling the truth.” Once, while her sister was still in Hong Kong, Ari had to pass through immigration on her return trip to Hong Kong. She, too, was detained at the airport and questioned at length by Hong Kong immigration officers. They scrutinized her passport and her Hong Kong identity card. Her answers—identical to her sister’s—apparently satisfied them. More likely, however, as suggested by the first epigraph above, the officers were convinced that her passport was authentic. Ari’s passport was thus stamped, and she was permitted to enter Hong Kong and go back to work.

Beginning in 2015, Ari could potentially have experienced serious trouble. The new Indonesian passport renewal policy required the collection of biometric data and compared all existing passports with the information
in a national passport database. If Ari and her sister had not returned to Indonesia before their passports expired, at least one of them could have ended up in prison like a dozen other women I met or knew about who were charged with immigration fraud. According to one unpublished report, around half of the hundreds of Indonesian migrant workers surveyed by an international non-governmental organization (NGO) in 2016 had inconsistencies in their passports, including discrepancies with their names, their dates of birth, and their Indonesian places of residence. Another survey, conducted by members of the Indonesian umbrella organization JBMI (Jaringan Buruh Migran Indonesia, Indonesian Migrant Workers’ Network) in 2016, found that almost a third of the five hundred workers surveyed had passport irregularities pertaining to names and/or dates of birth. Given these figures and that there were over 150,000 Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong at the time, we could reasonably expect that the passports of tens of thousands of Indonesians in Hong Kong have irregularities of this sort.

This book recounts many stories about Indonesian passports and the migrant workers who carry them, the recruitment brokers and agents who procure them, and the government immigration officials and middlemen who produce them and inspect them. At the core of this study are passports, especially so-called aspal passports (asperal is a contraction of asli tapi palsu, real but fake) and the social entanglements and inequalities they both reflect and produce (Ford and Lyons 2011). Despite the high percentage of likely aspal passports, most passport renewals are “nonevents,” in the sense that what could happen does not happen.

Although the plan was to eliminate aspal passports, I argue that ultimately most aspal passports were simply reproduced because the passport’s irregularities were not discovered. In most cases nothing was changed or corrected. Yet such nonevents can be “spectacularly significant” as an indication of a project’s failure (Falcone 2012, 155), and because of the questions they raise about why some passport holders had no problems (other than inconvenience, extra expense, time wasted, and perhaps a grumpy employer) whereas others, with similar circumstances, faced life-altering consequences. Some passport corrections resulted in job termination, early departure, court hearings, and prison sentences. This book thus points to the wider importance of studying both the passport nonevents and the
more serious outcomes. Passports, studied from different angles, reveal key insights about migration and mobility, labor and capital, borders and nation-states. They illustrate deep entanglements of power and money in migration infrastructures, across different temporalities and scales, and in the lives of migrant workers, helping us understand the vulnerabilities of labor migration today, especially in relation to the gray area of migration that combines the illegal and the legal and, ultimately, (re)produces aspal passports.

PASSPORT STORIES

A common saying about passports is that they are “the books that contain the best stories.” For some, this saying evokes tales of worldly explorations and adventures of privileged travelers, tourists, entrepreneurs, retirees, exchange students, and others from the wealthier pockets of the so-called developed world. Yet, in this age of global migration and mobility on an unprecedented scale, it is hard not to also think about the stories revealed by the passports (or lack of passports) of less privileged people who often appear in the news and are the topic of scholarly studies, such as refugees who seek to escape countries ravaged by war, violence, and environmental and natural disasters, or temporary migrant workers who seek opportunities to earn better wages abroad than are possible at home.

The passport stories in this book are about Indonesian women who have gone to work in Hong Kong. Some previously worked in other parts of Asia or the Middle East. Most of them grew up in villages in the provinces of Central or East Java and have middle school, and perhaps some high school, education. They worked as caregivers and domestic workers (so-called helpers in Hong Kong and Singapore, a term that diminishes the value of their labor). Their explorations and adventures, if they can be called that, relate largely to their experiences as low-paid workers in Hong Kong, “Asia’s World City,” a British colony from 1841 until 1997, when it became the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China.

Migrant women’s Indonesian passports tell fascinating stories of how they were produced and how they came to carry the FDH visa, as part of a
wider, state-supported, profit-driven, capitalist labor-recruitment process. These passports tell of how their holders obtained—or could not obtain—the required letter of permission from their fathers or husbands to acquire a passport to work abroad, and of how the PLs or calos (brokers or recruiters), often people with higher status or respect in their communities, created a workaround. They tell of how recruitment and placement agencies, recruiters, Indonesian government bureaucrats, and regional immigration staff make money from producing or procuring identity documents and new passports, or by validating and amending existing ones. Such passport stories reveal forms of power, gendered inequality, exploitation, corruption, and illegal recruitment practices that entangle migrant workers, agencies and recruiters, government bureaucrats, and many others. They also raise questions about “care” for the “little people” (orang-orang kesil), which has a more complicated relationship with corruption (korupsi) than first meets the eye (Tidey 2018). Like all passports, they document membership in a nation-state as well as individual identities (Caplan 2001; McKeown 2008). They reveal what it means to be “marked” as a domestic worker while crossing borders, to have your passport held by agents or employers, and to be charged with identity fraud.

I have long been fascinated and surprised by the passport stories I heard since the 1990s, such as Ari’s above. This research project officially began in 2015, however, when I first learned, from a dedicated and enthusiastic Indonesian consular official, about the newly introduced “passport project” that was linked to a biometric database project and was being implemented in Hong Kong. The Indonesian consulate’s new passport renewal system subsequently became the main subject of my research. I listened to many new passport stories and rethought the older ones that I had heard before. These stories taught me that passports are far more interesting—and more complicated to study—than they first appear. Passport stories led me to rethink common analytical dichotomies, including real and fake identities or documents, citizens and migrants, and the relationships between ethnographer and interlocutor, care and control, and state and

1. For key sources on the processes of Indonesian migration and the role of agencies and recruiters, see Ford and Lyons (2011); Killias (2018); Kloppenburg (2013); Lindquist (2010, 2012, 2015, 2018a, 2018b); Silvey (2004, 2007).
Many assumptions that I brought to this project turned out to be wrong or far too simplistic. The state does not, for example, have a monopoly on issuing passports, and despite the seeming fixity of identities in passports, identities are rarely as simple as real (*asli*) or fake (*palsu*). Even the most common and seemingly simple passport stories reveal subtleties and complexities, illustrating the vast inequalities that are inherent in the labor migration industry, and upon which the industry thrives.

Passports are entangled with global histories of mobility or immobility and labor exploitation in Asia and Africa, from slavery to indentured labor to contemporary labor migration (Mongia 1999, 2018). This history is tied to other documents and forms of identification, from the documentation of slave “ownership” to indenture contracts, to the passports and visas of so-called free laborers. Today’s passports are assumed to mark a clear distinction between the unfree labor of the past and the free labor of today. Yet again, this supposed dichotomy involves complicated entanglements of free and unfree labor. Passports and work visas—like their precursors—are closely tied to global capital and the circulation of labor migrants from the global south and still involve disposable labor and exploitation. Today’s labor migrations are associated with liberal humanist ideals of the modern period and legal definitions of consent. Today’s labor migration is assumed to be free and consensual, but as this book illustrates, that is not always the case.

One very common passport story in Hong Kong, concerning workers’ freedom, is about employers or employment agents who take domestic workers’ passports away from them without consent. A passport is, in fact, the property of the issuing government and should be held only by the person to whom it is issued. Yet the confiscation of passports in Hong Kong is common. Some employers or agents are said to take passports for “safe keeping,” because they “care” and do not want the passport to get lost or stolen, while others are said to “confiscate” them to “control” migrant workers and prevent them from running away. Some agents and employers take the workers’ passports to “protect” them from taking out devastating loans.

It is sometimes difficult to know which motives drive the seemingly identical practice of taking away a domestic worker’s passport. Is the practice indicative of care or control? One worker may experience it as a welcome gesture of care, while another considers it an unwelcome act of control and an indication of her lack of freedom. Whether “my employer/
agent takes my passport for safekeeping because she is looking after me” or “my employer/agent confiscated it to control me” or “so I cannot run away” relates partly to individual subjectivities and social relations. The first instance may be interpreted and experienced by a young and inexperienced domestic worker as care; the second may be considered by a more experienced and independent domestic worker as unwanted control. The consulate might treat such cases differently as well, retrieving the passport for workers who have paid off their loans, but not for those who are still in debt (Palmer 2016, 152–55). As we will see, care and control are not two sides of a coin but are always intertwined and entangled with the process of migration and its inequalities, some of which have deep roots in the global history of labor exploitation, surveillance, and control.

There are some passport stories that many travelers can relate to. At official border crossings at airports, migrant workers’ passports—like those of other travelers—usually receive “the look” from immigration officials, who glance quickly up and down from the passport to the holder’s face to the passport again and to the computer screen, scrutinizing them for correspondence. As Mahmoud Keshavarz notes in this chapter’s second epigraph, the officials are more concerned with the passport’s authenticity than with “its authentic relation to the represented body” (2019, 37).

Like the anxiety alluded to by Mark Salter in the other epigraph, I always experience a moment of suspense and a twinge of excitement and anxiety until I ultimately receive the nod and am waved through immigration. Do I resemble the person in my passport photograph, from almost a decade ago, enough that I will be permitted to pass? I am privileged, based on my whiteness and U.S. passport (or earlier UK passport). Migrant workers do not have the same sense of entitlement. Their passports are scrutinized alongside their employment documents, visas, and Hong Kong identity cards (as were Ari’s and her sister’s). In some cases, they are taken aside for an interview, then forbidden from entering and turned away or detained. Especially after 2015, the anxiety and risk surrounding Indonesian passports grew.

2. One consular official told Palmer that the worker’s passport was not “confiscated” but was being held as security for the loan that covered her recruitment fees (2016, 153).
3. On care and control in Asian migration, see Johnson and Lindquist (2020); Constable (2020).
Indonesian domestic worker and migrant activist Eni Lestari, founder of the ATKI (Asosiasi Tenaga Kerja Indonesia, Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers) and chairperson of the International Migrants Alliance (IMA), is a well-known, award-winning leader who has spoken at the United Nations (UN). When I invited her to talk at the University of Pittsburgh in 2019, she described her border-crossing experiences and how she prepares for them. She expects many questions, and worries that she might not be allowed to enter. U.S. immigration officials ask her why she is coming to the United States; when she says she was invited to speak at a university, they ask her occupation. She has come to expect the incredulous expression on their faces and the subsequent questions: Why would a domestic worker be invited to talk at the UN or at a university? Why travel without your employer? She always has her official letters of invitation ready. She dresses up for flights, to not look “like a maid.” When Eni described this, my immediate and thoughtless response was “I know what you mean.” I grumbled about too often being singled out for extra baggage and security checks. At the time, I failed to recognize the significant difference in our situations. I cross borders with the confidence of a privileged white person carrying a U.S. passport. I dress comfortably for long flights and have never—since becoming a U.S. citizen—worried that I would not be allowed to enter a country. In fact, I have fantasized about what a good story it would make, should I be stopped and questioned about my work or prohibited from entering.4 Every passport story about crossing (or not crossing) borders is about who you are, about whether you are who you are assumed to be, and about control, privilege, and inequalities of nationality, race, gender, and class (Mongia 2018; Singha 2013).

By late 2015, Indonesian passport stories became an urgent topic of conversation, not only among Indonesian migrant workers. They were the topic of diplomatic “G2G” (government to government) discussions

4. During my early research in Hong Kong before 1997 (as a U.S. “alien” or permanent resident), I used my British passport (based on my birth in England and my father’s Scottish nationality). In contrast to a French passport, based on my mother’s nationality, the British passport provided me easy entry to Hong Kong. It also meant that (at the time), I paid more for a visa to go to India than my partner, who carried a U.S. passport. Post-2020, with the Chinese National People’s Congress in Beijing passing the national security law for Hong Kong, the situation may well change for some U.S. citizens, including journalists and academics.
between Hong Kong immigration and Indonesian consular officials, and
between top Hong Kong government officials and their Indonesian min-
isterial counterparts. The term G2G was uttered many times by consular
officials and others during my research; they explained that it means more
than just intergovernmental communication. It also implies “sharing of
electronic data and information systems” between governments or gov-
ernment departments in support of e-initiatives, and thus the term has
special relevance to passports and biometrics. Besides G2G settings, pass-
port stories are also set in courtrooms, airports, waiting rooms, parks,
shopping malls, and streets where they might have been stolen from back-
packs or lost, borrowed, or rented out.\footnote{On “identity loans” among migrant workers in California’s Central Valley, see Horton (2015).} Passport stories involve official
and unofficial rankings or grades of nation-states and their global net-
works of visa and visa-free entry policies. They also involve biopolitics and
the micro-practices of photographing, fingerprinting, iris scans, and the
taking of biometric measurements that are entered into government data-
bases. Such procedures and new technologies are shaped by international
and global policies whose stated aims are to prevent trafficking and terror-
ism, key contemporary concerns; yet they also carry implications and
unintended consequences for passport holders.

Passport stories often contrast the present with the recent past. I heard
stories about freer times, before biometrics were used, when Japan, Korea,
and Taiwan issued migrant workers or entertainers short-term visas
(three or six months). The workers would sell their current passports with
soon-to-expire visas to someone who had already overstayed and was
ready to leave. Later, when they were ready to leave, they would buy a
passport from another newcomer for their own use. Passports also evoke
earlier historical connections to their precursors, recalling global and
colonial histories.

Passports and their precursors are widely understood to have two main
functions: to regulate labor mobility and to protect state boundaries,
functions that can be traced to the earliest history of passports in the form
of travel passes and letters of introduction (Torpey 2000). They have been
used to identify and keep track of unwanted people—for example,
Romanians in Europe and Jews in Nazi Germany (Keshavarz 2015, 8). Passports construct meanings and identities, although their purpose is to document them—to fix and to define both individual and collective identities (Caplan and Torpey 2001). Passports are especially important in periods of migration. From the perspective of the “receiving” state, passports and their documentation of nationality and place of origin (often as a proxy for race) have historically developed as a means of restricting the entry of non-white or non-European people considered “undesirable” (Mongia 1999).

The issuance of passports is a practice of governmentality, an “apparatus of security,” a technique through which well-ordered society is created (Foucault 1991, 103–04). Although passports have changed through time, in form and content, they carry continuities with the past, including echoes of inequalities. Indonesian passports are historically tied to Dutch-era colonial passen stelsel, security-related “internal” travel passes. Passen stelsel were designed to keep certain populations—Chinese, “Arabs,” and “Natives”—in segregated neighborhoods as part of the wijkendwang, a residential zoning system, so that they did not mix with others and cause trouble. Colonial travel passes were tied to security, policing, and taxation. They also helped ensure that local “native” cultivators remained on the land and grew crops, quotas of which were required to be paid as taxes. As such—like passports today—they served to create legibility for the state (Scott 1998). Historically, such passes regulated the movement of traders and merchants, and documents facilitated and regulated the movement of laborers for mines or plantations in regions with labor shortages (Kloppenburg 2013; Lindquist 2018a; Stoler 1985). Indonesian passports today, like all passports, still reinforce specific gendered, classed, and ethnic or racialized patterns of labor movement and control.

Passports create, inscribe, and naturalize not only national identity, but also the presumably true and authentic (asli) individual identity of the holder (Caplan and Torpey 2001). They demarcate individual, social, and physical borders as well as global alliances. They produce unequal access of citizens of various sorts and of noncitizens to mobility. They both reflect and

produce, as Keshavarz (2019) argues, inequalities between different types of citizens and noncitizens, based on class, gender, religion, appearance, marital status, age, and so on. Passport identities may appear fixed, singular, or unambiguous, but they are constructed in and by passports and other documents. Until recent passport reforms, Indonesian migrant workers’ passports were good for three years (not the usual five), had fewer pages, and had a work permit stamped inside. Some have a recruitment agency sticker on the cover “so the official doesn’t even need to open the passport to recognize it as a migrant worker passport” (Kloppenburg 2013, 116).

S O C I A L  A N D  E C O N O M I C  L I V E S  O F  P A S S P O R T S

Passports gain different meanings in different contexts and illuminate the contexts through which they pass. Besides thinking about passport stories recounted by migrant workers and other travelers, we can also think about passports in relation to their commoditization and value. Numerous online sites openly offer to sell “real and fake” passports. Moreover, headlines like “How Much Is Your Passport Worth?” that measure the relative value of different passports in terms of their advantages of visa free passage, and the “flexible citizenship” achieved by privileged people who can acquire multiple passports (Ong 1999), suggest the commoditization and value of passports quite apart from the actual cost of obtaining one. Refugees and asylum seekers are also known to purchase or borrow passports and other documents in their efforts to escape the violence of war, oppression, and economic disasters in their home countries (Keshavarz 2019). Given changing technology, it is increasingly difficult and expensive to produce and obtain counterfeit passports. Nonetheless, authentic and official passports and other identity documents can still be obtained, at a cost, in Indonesia and other countries, with the help of middlemen and corrupt government officials.

Arjun Appadurai’s writing about “the social life of things” examines the shifting value of things—art objects, heirlooms, carpets, sacred objects—

7. For example, Buy Real and Fake Passports Online n.d.
8. For passport rankings and security, visit Passport Index (www.passportindex.org); see also Jakarta Post (2017).
and their commoditization and exchange. He defines a commodity initially as “any thing intended for exchange” (1986, 9). Passports are not normally intended for exchange, but they can be produced and bought and sold like commodities—as can citizenship and university admissions (Beck 2017; Keshavarz 2016, 2019). Tracing their social lives and their commoditization, and the different meanings that passports acquire along the way, illuminates the socioeconomic and political contexts they pass through, revealing specific entanglements of passports with states and economies, and with an array of people, well beyond the passport holder.

Scholars of social network analysis and of actor-network theory have described markets and economies as “entangled in a web of relations and connections” with objects, people, and processes (Callon 1998, 8). Michel Callon’s work on markets and economic logic builds on ideas of “entangled objects” (Thomas 1991) and “careers of objects” (Appadurai 1986) to argue that it is difficult to disentangle relationships from economic markets, including so-called modern ones. He writes that “if the thing remains entangled, the one who receives it... cannot escape from the web of relations” (Callon 1998, 19). Like other “things” such as gifts and commodities, passports—whether real or fake—entangle the holder within a web of attachments to other actors, institutions, and processes through which the passport was produced and validated, amended, corrected, stamped with visas, carried, questioned, examined, confiscated, and canceled or replaced at various points in time. With reference to false distinctions between so-called market and nonmarket economies, Callon writes that “the advantage of this anthropology of entanglement is that it frees us from the irritating and sterile distinctions between state and market or between global economy and national economies” (1998, 40; my italics). As I argue in this book, the anthropology of entanglement frees us from many other “irritating and sterile” distinctions as well; passports refuse disentanglement from their wider spatial, temporal, political and economic, social and individual contexts and connections and thus provide a fertile entry and focal point for the study of migration. Passports force us to see and to question many common and relevant binaries of us and them, care and control, real and fake, state and society, migrant and citizen, free and unfree—all of which are entangled and not oppositional, as revealed in passport stories, histories, and social relations.
The new Indonesian passport project drew my attention—and eventually my fascination—to the entanglements of passports with migrant workers and many other actors, including migrant worker activists, advocates, lawyers, consular officials, Indonesian and Hong Kong government officials, employers, and recruitment agents and brokers. They also led to bigger-picture questions about history and globalization. The meanings that people attribute to passports are reflected in the stories they tell and their actions. They derive from “human transactions, attributions, and motivations” in relation to use and circulation of things (Appadurai 1986, 5). How passports and other related documents are sold or traded, regulated, and circulated in specific historical, social, and cultural contexts reveals not only a way to understand how value is “sought after,” how people find value in things, or how things give value to social relations (Appadurai 1986), but also how passports, as (normally) government-produced documents, represent more than a simple relationship between citizen and state, state and society, or state control of mobility. They also relate to the global labor market and illuminate key aspects of the lucrative labor recruitment industry and the wider migration infrastructure, where travel documents like passports can serve to control and constrain their holders rather than freeing them.9

In his innovative study of passports, Keshavarz argues that they articulate “a series of relations which legalize certain bodies while illegalizing other bodies.” A passport, by design, “persuades users and the state that passports are given, neutral or merely a product.” But passports articulate “possibilities of moving, residing and accessing the world. . . . They shape power relations and orient such relations to certain directions given economic, political and historical tendencies. Thus, material articulations while deriving from certain forms of politics, also form specific politics of movement, inhabitation and emplacement” (Keshavarz 2015, 15). Although often associated with freedom, passports are also linked to immobility and lack of freedom. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s experience at London Heathrow airport decades ago, when she was prevented from boarding a flight from London to Canada, is a well-cited example.

9. On “migration infrastructures,” see Lin et al. (2017); Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh (2012); Xiang and Lindquist (2014).
(Keshavarz 2015, 9; Salter 2015, 23; Spivak and Gunew 1990). Spivak could travel without a visa from the United States to Canada on Air Canada, but the airline staff in London would not allow her to board her flight to Canada. Surprised, she said, “Look here, I am the same person, the same passport.” Yet the visa was necessary, she writes, because Indians from London might “want to jump ship to Canada” (Spivak and Gunew 1990, 65). The politics of mobility, the passport holder’s identity, and her relationship to specific locations thus shift depending on where—both figuratively and literally—she is coming from, even when she uses the same passport.10

Ari’s and her sister’s passports make a similar point. They contain seemingly identical information, but the “same” passport is held by two different women; they have the same place of birth, the same name, and the same birth date, but were issued at different times, most likely from the same regional government office, and contain different photographs, FDH visa dates, and passport numbers. The social lives of their passports point to the limitations of identity documentation practices, and to passport entanglements with government offices, licit and illicit and legal and illegal processes, labor recruitment, and gendered mobilities. These processes are all part of a wider “migration infrastructure” defined as “the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility” (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, 122) or a wider assemblage of global mobility (Salter 2015). Passports and visas are intertwined with global and historical practices of control and surveillance of mobile people, with older paper records and files and with newer information technologies, electronic archives, and bureaucratic state regulatory systems.

Indonesian immigration officials tell stories about new biometric passports as tools and symbols of a responsible, reliable, and accountable modern state that practices “good governance.” In other words, biometric high-tech passports indicate—outwardly to a global audience—that Indonesia is a global player and is following the “right” path to development, adhering to wider measures of the International Organization for Migration, the International Civil Aviation Organization, the World Bank,

10. Mongia’s (1999, 2018) study of passports as a way to racially discriminate against Indians who sought entry to Canada in the early 1900s (see chapter 5) is highly relevant to Spivak’s experience.
and the International Monetary Fund that judge and offer assistance to regions of the “global south” (using the standards of the West). New biometric passports represent a claim to respect as a “modern nation-state.” Immigration officials pointed out the key role of passports in the “global effort” to fight terrorism and prevent trafficking by modernizing and improving the reliability, accuracy, and authenticity of passports and related data and surveillance systems.

Before 2004, the minimum age for Indonesian women to migrate for work was eighteen, but it was well known that many were only in their mid-teens when they went to work abroad. By the early 2000s, partly due to the annual U.S. Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, concerns about “child trafficking” increased, and in 2004, to improve overall migratory care and control and to deter underage migration, the minimum age for Indonesian migrant domestic workers was raised to twenty-one, where it remains today. Accurate passports are widely considered essential in promoting global security, yet they present challenges in locations where corruption and fraudulent documents are commonplace (Bubandt 2008, 2009; Ford and Lyons 2011; Imigrasi 2018; Palmer 2016; Salter 2015; U.S. Department of State 2006). Aspal passports are illegal in Indonesia, but they are widely socially approved, or “licit” (Ford and Lyons 2011). Those who produce and facilitate the acquisition of such documents, at least in some cases, intend to help prospective migrants. By “helping” people get around expensive, complicated, or stultifying state requirements, corruption (or collusion or nepotism) can, “in certain circumstances, ameliorate patterns of exclusion, marginalization, and alienation” (Muir and Gupta 2018, S8).

The “Indonesian passport project” was officially presented (and described to me by Indonesian consular and immigration officials) as part of a government initiative to “protect” women migrant workers in response to public outcries over the physical and emotional violence migrant workers have experienced abroad, including death and rape. A related requirement is that women who want to work abroad as domestic workers must utilize a recruitment agency.11 Without a letter of support from an agency, they cannot legally go to work in Hong Kong. However, agencies have long

11. Indonesian Law no. 39/2004, on the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, and its later replacement, Law no. 18/2017, both mandate the use of registered recruitment agencies.